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**Inter-ethnic Relations and Bounding Agency: The Social Space  
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**Abstract<sup>1</sup>**

European countries are being urged to reform their educational systems to enhance the integration of migrant populations. In many respects, migrant-origin pupils still lack equal educational opportunities in Finland despite the targeted practices and support. This article concerns the inter-ethnic interaction taking place in study guidance and counselling in the final year of Finnish comprehensive school. It poses a question ‘how do young people construct their educational identities in classroom-level interactions in a multi-ethnic class’? The mixed methods research setting offers two sets of data: selective observation (two events) and life-span interviews (n = 8). The outcomes portray how multi-ethnic school classes open opportunities and supportive bridges for the pupils to contact other ethnicities. Nevertheless, the inter-ethnic interaction was also layered with societal hierarchies which constructed and bounded pupils’ ethnic and educational identities. Finally, the article emphasises the opportunities that the locality offers to the schools.

*Keywords: inter-ethnic relations, study guidance and counselling, bounded agency, educational transitions.*

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## 1. Introduction

The Finnish education system is tackling the issues of integrating migrant-background pupils into education and work. Although education is free of charge and the education system offers multiple forms special education and support, young people with a migrant background underperform at comprehensive school and lack equal educational opportunities in upper secondary education – mostly (but not only) depending on their prior school achievements and family resources (see e.g. Kilpi-Jakonen, 2011; 2012). Among other things, study guidance and counselling fail to guide the young people with a migrant background towards firm educational trajectories and they face multiple and constant negotiations between opportunities, hopes and expectations (Kalalahti et al., 2020). Their migrant background sets boundaries to young peoples' agencies with more evident and individual issues like language skills or study difficulties, but also with some underlying social factors like high expectations, prejudice and segregation (Mäkelä and Kalalahti, 2020; Zacheus et al., 2019).

The aim of this article is to report on analysis of pupils' inter-ethnic interactions at two events that took place at a multi-ethnic lower secondary school located in a relatively-deprived urban Finnish neighbourhood. The 15–16-years old pupils ( $n = 13$ ) being observed were taking their final year of compulsory education and attending study guidance and counselling classes in which they were prepared for the forthcoming upper secondary choice. These events were analysed as *lived social spaces* (de Haan and Leander, 2011), where the interaction within the inter-ethnic peer relations constructs *figured worlds* (Roth and Erstad, 2016; Holland et al., 1998) and *horizons of actions* (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) of the upper secondary education choices. In the analysis I examine how these events offer building blocks for the pupils' educational identities (Moore, 2006; Yoon, 2012) as platforms for interethnic interaction (see e.g. Kivijärvi, 2013; 2014).

The starting point for this article has been the difficulties the Finnish education system has faced in ensuring that immigrants and their descendants have equal educational opportunities. Finland still has a relatively low proportion of students with a migrant background (similar to the pattern in eastern European countries like Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovenia (UNESCO, 2018: 42)), but has one of the widest above-average gaps between native and non-native speakers in learning outcomes among OECD countries (along with Sweden and Slovenia (Grunfelder et al., 2018; Ismail, 2019)), and foreign background has an impact on the completion of upper secondary education (OSF, 2018). The question of integration through education has become one of the major policy objectives especially after the rapid increase in immigration in 2015 (MoEC, 2019; UNESCO, 2018). Multiple fields of study underline the importance of successful integration to improve school achievements, educational attitudes and overall well-being, among other spheres beyond schooling (Makarova and Birman, 2016; Madsen et al., 2016; Autiero, 2017). Classroom-level practices could enhance positive intercultural relationships to reduce inter-ethnic tensions, racism and discrimination.

Although integration of the young people with migrant background into the Finnish society is a much-emphasised target of schooling, the ways to improve integration are limited (Kurki, 2019) and schools are still responding to students'

ethno-racial diversity ineffectively (Makarova and Birman, 2016, Vedder et al., 2006). Research has offered several explanations why schools fail to meet the challenge of diversity. Acculturation is a multifaceted construct which involves identity development as well as psychological and behavioural adjustment, as Makarova and Birman have explained (2015: 307). Individuals also have different acculturation orientations, based on how they identify and self-position to the mainstream culture or their ethnic-origin culture: (a) integration (maintaining both the culture of origin and adapting to the host society), (b) assimilation (integration into mainstream society), (c) separation (preserving ethnic-origin culture) and (d) marginalisation (not integrating) (see Autiero, 2017; Makarova and Birman, 2015; also Berry, 1997; Phinney et al., 2001).

As Makarova and Birman stress (2016: 11), minority youth might face a certain ‘acculturation dilemma’ if they need assimilative orientation to integrate into schools, but acculturative pressure can also burden their psychological adjustment. Since it seems that pupils would adjust to schools more easily if they favour assimilation in their acculturation (Makarova and Birman, 2015), schools try to emphasise the adjustment to the mainstream. Nevertheless, this might lead to acculturative pressure and distance-taking to ethnic communities and heritage cultures (Makarova and Birman, 2016).

## **2. Positional identities framing educational identities**

Acculturation takes place in negotiations within different social contexts. Here the concept of *positional identities* is utilised. Following Holland et al. (1998) I consider that young people construct their understanding of themselves in different contexts and the social interaction in them. Interaction in the classroom, on school trips, in hallways and canteens offer events of negotiations of positional identities, where pupils inhabit self-understandings and changeable identities, understandings of them and others. These events are looked at as figured worlds in which pupils offer different positions to other pupils and ‘figure who they are’ (Roth and Erstad, 2016: 58; Holland et al., 1998). For example, they might consider others and themselves to be ‘immigrant’, ‘girl’, or ‘well-performing’ pupils.

Ethnic identity is analysed here with *educational identities* (see e.g. Moore, 2006; also *learner identity*, e.g. Yoon, 2012). As Roth and Erstad have demonstrated (2016; see also Holland et al., 1998), positional identities and figured worlds are especially fruitful concepts from which to analyse how young people produce personal and social identities affecting their educational decisions. In the interaction, pupils become aware, negotiate and receive external confirmation of their unique abilities from teachers and peers (Yoon, 2012) and therefore negotiate their educational identities. Educational identity is a social structure, ‘based on the meanings formed in the context of education’ (Moore, 2006: 150). Study guidance and counselling events bring about young people’s understandings about their educational opportunities. In a dynamic process of interaction, they construct and modify the horizons of actions of the young people – i.e. it determines what options are visible for them from their individual and structural positions (see Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997).

### ***3. Classroom-level interaction and ethnic boundaries***

The empirical focus of this article is on the interaction that takes place in the social space of study guidance and counselling. The 9th graders are about to make their upper-secondary choices and ponder their abilities and opportunities. This decision-making process is understood here as an identity project. As Stokes and Wyn (2007) highlight, it is important to recognise the role that learning institutions have on the identity constructions of young people. The study guidance and counselling events are social places where social practice of identity work takes place (de Haan and Leander, 2011). They are situations in which young people face the multiplicity of their surrounding social contexts (Stokes and Wyn, 2007), with all the prejudices and expectations. As de Haan and Leander explain, social space is 'a resource for ethnic identity work', where young people 'offer to one another, impose on one another, and choose for themselves subject positions' (de Haan and Leander, 2011: 320; see also Holland and Leander, 2004). These social spaces include and produce power relations where pupils' or their ethnic groups' identities are shaped. Hence they are therefore empirical windows to manifestations of 'new ethnicities' (see Hall, 2005), i.e. windows to the diversity of ethnicities and ethnic subjects.

This interaction in social spaces also produces ethnic boundaries. They are social spaces in practices of 'ethnic othering' (de Haan and Leander 2011: 321), where young people meet with their personal and collective (ethnic) histories and construe their ethnic identities. As de Haan and Leander (2011) have shown, ethnic identities are not stable and are not situated in one specific social space, but they can be connected to multiple spaces. Each of the young people comes to the classes with a unique ethnic background, which becomes 'othered' by other pupils. These ethnicities intertwine with other 'otherings' and construe the young people's subjectivities that 'involve different, diverse and possibly contradictory subjectivities' (Stokes and Wyn 2007: 500).

### ***4. Research setting***

The aim of this article is to look deeply into the inter-ethnic interaction taking place in the social space of study guidance and counselling. The research question is 'how do young people construct their educational identities in a class-room-level interaction in a multi-ethnic class'?

The units of analysis stem from one-year fieldwork in a 9th grade school class and eight life-span interviews of young people (approximately 15 years old) from a range of migrant backgrounds. The observations took place during the 2016–2017 academic year in a school located in an urban neighbourhood with a low average education level in the population and a high proportion of immigrants (<40 per cent of population with higher education, the average being >50 per cent in the municipality; >30 per cent of the population speaking a foreign language, the average being >16 per cent in the municipality (OSF, 2016a; 2016b)). The 9th grade is the final grade of compulsory comprehensive education in Finland.

During the fieldwork I made selective observations at all events (two to three hours each) related to study guidance and counselling. Among other things, I

followed lessons, school visits, and parental events. I engaged in the events and supported the work of the teacher. I helped with the tasks the pupils took on and guided the groups at the 'open day' events of upper secondary education.

In this article I focus on the interviews and three events: a tutorial session in which the pupils were trained to complete the joint application for upper secondary education and two excursions to upper secondary education institutions. I analysed these events in two parts and at the beginning of both parts, I briefly mapped out the setting of these events. Interpretations have been strengthened with observations from other events.

The interviews ( $n = 8$ ) were made during the final month of the 9th grade. They were life-span interviews, which were made around two life spans. First, the pupils drew a life-span of their past and marked their most meaningful life events. These events were then discussed with the interviewer. Second, they drew up a future life-span with future visions, and these were discussed during the interviews. These interviews were used in this article to construct the contexts in which young people with immigrant origins are positioned in the Finnish education system.

The methodology has been borrowed from ethnographic research. The core unit of analysis is narrative field notes, from which I offer some quotations to make the argumentation more vivid. First, all the micro events in which the pupils or teachers positioned them and 'others' were selected for the analyses (Yoon, 2012: 982, 987) and the interactions within them read especially from the viewpoints of horizons of actions (educational identities) and/or acculturation (ethnic identities). From the field notes and interviews, lists of the distinctions (social categories) expressed in these positions, for instance where the pupils took the position of being a 'Finn' instead of 'British' or being a 'well-educated' instead of 'working class', were made. After that, the processes of positioning (Holland and Leander, 2004) were analysed.

The pupils were informed about the research and the research permission was sought from the municipalities' educational authorities. Consent letters were sent to the parents for the interviews. Consent letters for the observation were not sent to the pupils, but the pupils were informed about the research and the ethical issues were explained to them. All pupils gave oral agreement for them to be observed. It was explained that I would not make audio or video records, nor would anyone be recognisable from the analyses or reports. Field notes were made after the observations and all identity information was excluded (names or social security numbers), although they were mentioned or were visible on the screen. No access to official documents was sought from the local educational authorities so that the pupils would be more open in their discussions during the observation. All the analyses and the data were made anonymous so that the pupils, schools, neighbourhoods and the municipality could not be recognized. There is very limited information about the migrant background of the pupils by nation, and all recognizable information was changed when necessary (gender, for instance). We discussed with the pupils their feelings and emotions during the observation and they knew they could interrupt the observations or the interviews at any time.

## 5. Outcomes

### 5.1 *Us and them – intertwining distinctions*

The first event was a study guidance lesson in the IT class, about which three analytical notions have been established.

#### 5.1.1 Inter-ethnic interaction and distinctions

Most of the pupils in the class ( $n = 13$ ) belonged to ethnic minorities and Finnish was just another ethnic position among many. Since there is no official knowledge of their minority status, their migrant backgrounds were analysed from the interviews (eight pupils) and from the observations. Eight of the 13 pupils were visible minorities (they were non-white), explained their migrant background or had a language other than Finnish as their mother tongue. I considered the other five pupils to have Finnish origins based on the interviews, or on the observations (white pupils speaking fluent Finnish). This classification of ethnic minorities and a Finnish majority is artificial, and this was not used in this article for any purpose other than to show that the class was multi-ethnic. Hence, the group was multi-ethnic and more heterogeneous than in the average Finnish school class (within this school, approximately 37 per cent of the students were foreign-language pupils, the average being 5 per cent across the country and 16 per cent in the municipality being studied: OSF, 2016a). All the pupils used Finnish or a mixture of Finnish and English in the class: the group was so heterogeneous that they did not have other common language(s).

Although the school was in a neighbourhood with low incomes and education levels, the pupils said in the interviews that their parents did have a wide variety of education from short basic education to higher education. Some emphasised their family's distinguished societal position in their country of origin and a few also in Finland. Often the family's position was seen as being unprivileged in Finland. Therefore, the first impression was that the group was so heterogeneous that they would not raise the question of belonging to an ethnic minority/majority, nor bring up specific social class(es). Not only was the group very multi-ethnic, but the position of the families was also a mixture of life histories and societal changes. The group was very much providing inter-ethnic contact, which corresponds with lower intergroup prejudice (Toipp and Pettigrew, 2005) and promotes acculturation (Kunst et al., 2015).

The study counsellor, a 30-year-old white woman, had worked for several years in this multi-ethnic school. She did not actively raise the questions of boundary make up but offered a trustful and supportive platform for it. In her teaching she valued all cultures and ethnic cultures, different work and study options equally, as well as all genders. She let the students work with computers alone and with groups and followed their discussions from a distance. When she thought that a pupil needed individual support and guidance, she readily arranged time for personal meetings, and if the pupils got anxious, she turned their attention to other issues. She openly questioned the divisions between general upper



secondary education and vocational training and encouraged the pupils to find information from a variety of sources.

Nevertheless, the question of positions was by no means irrelevant to the pupils, and the analysis showed how they were constantly negotiating their ethnic and class-based identities.

The study guidance lesson in the IT class had me, the study counsellor and 13 pupils in the class .... The task was to fill out the form for the joint application, print it and to return it the next time with the parent's permission, when we would fill out the application online. The boys do not know their ID-numbers and try to figure what they are and how to get one. Pupils discuss the meaning of the 'double nationalities' and hesitate to add that information to the application. There was vivid discussion on nationalities. Boys get surprised about their peer's nationalities and discuss the benefits or restrictions on them (army and voting, for instance). One pupil stated that he would definitely not record his non-Finnish nationality in the form. The study counsellor and I took part in the discussion, but we also encouraged the students to fill out the form at home, with parents. It feels that the country of origin suddenly becomes very important. The study counsellor lets the discussion flow [...] (field notes)

As this quote exemplifies, the inter-ethnic interaction taking place in the class was rich. During the lesson in which they prepared for the forthcoming upper secondary application, the question of nationalities came under inter-ethnic interaction. Many of the pupils had lived most of their lives in the same local neighbourhoods and they had long-time friends in the class: young people with both Finnish and non-Finnish origins. The atmosphere in the class was supportive and intimate for them to discuss their nationalities, and many of them openly discussed the meaning of their different origins. Yet the upcoming upper secondary education choice and the interaction taking place in the IT class brought into sight many of the underlying tensions, in which they also tested their biographical histories against their ethnic and personal backgrounds. At the same time, pupils were surprised, peculiar, annoyed and emphatic.

In the class there were pupils with a variety of ethnic backgrounds who had just joked about racism and prejudice during the break. The discussion had turned to minorities and majorities and these three pupils, friends and peers from primary school, were jointly laughing at the definition of 'coloured people': 'like hey I am the only really black [pupil] here, like you are actually yellow, aren't you? And what are you then, white? Who cares?' [all laughing together] (field notes). Yet the question of nationalities and ethnic-related histories seemed to divide them and finally it burst into an argument among them:

Three boys [sitting next to each other on computers and filling out the form] discuss their educational aspirations and work expectations. One pupil [Pupil#1] takes a critical stance on Finnish society and its benefits. Another pupil [Pupil#2] raises his voice and complains to the others about he and his family paying lots of taxes which are used to help the families with the first



pupil's ethnic origin. – 'You should be grateful for the support'. The boy in the middle tries to calm his friends down until the teacher takes the first boy to the copy room. The third boy, offended, shuts down the computer of the first boy causing the loss of his already filled-out form. The first boy has calmed down with the teacher and they continue to discuss the next lesson's topic, how to manage in a job interview. (field notes)

In this event, the pupils, friends and peers, turn the discussion from the nationalities to educational aspirations and life in the work force. They start to argue whether Finland is a good place to live and if some ethnic groups face discrimination or prejudice in the work force and in society in general. The 'friendly bullying' and joking that took place during the break turned suddenly to arguments in which they constructed hierarchies based on ethnicities and prejudice. Pupil#1 (with an African background) took the position of the unprivileged minority, and Pupil#2 (with an Asian background) counter-positioned himself with the (Finnish) majority, paying taxes to support the disadvantaged minorities. In line with the outcomes reported by de Haan and Leander (2011), the pupils who previously identified themselves equally with shared non-Finnish positions based on their outlooks, now took hierarchical positions. Within these positions, Pupil#1 domesticated the space as a tax payer who had the power to ask for thankfulness from Pupil#2. The study counsellor did not have any tools to dismantle the situation, other than to take Pupil#1 with her.

This event portrays how the hierarchical position among the pupils is a mixture of personal and collective (ethnic) histories which take place as they negotiate their educational identities and adjust them to their ethnic identities. Their families had very different migration histories and their neighbourhoods had many ethnic narratives. Some families were struggling with low incomes whereas some separated themselves from working-class positions and took the subject position of the well-educated middle classes. When constructing their educational identities, they also adjusted them to many other dimensions. These young people seemed to express their families' migration storylines even more: disappointment with the Finnish bureaucracy, their experiences with different educational opportunities, their own skills and ambitions, as well as their future orientations towards their home country. In the interaction they became aware of their unique abilities and negotiated and received external confirmation from teachers and peers (Yoon, 2012).

### 5.1.2 Interaction and separation

The interpretations of the *figured worlds* (Roth and Erstad, 2016; Holland et al., 1998) of the immigrant students and students with an immigrant background also characterise their subjective position in the classroom. By positioning each other intentionally or unintentionally, they might limit the sense of belonging and acculturation (Yoon, 2012; Makarova and Birman, 2016). Their positioning might also reflect attempts to integrate, or to assimilate, separate or marginalise others.

In the IT class the pupils seemed to be seated so that there was one group of immigrant-origin girls making similar education choices, one group of immigrant-

origin boys making similar choices, and others were sitting by themselves. My attention was especially on the few pupils who were taking their personal space and working with the task independently, situated firmly at the other side of the classroom. They did not take part in the vivid discussion on their educational opportunities and aspirations.

One of them was a recent immigrant (Pupil#3) who was sitting as far as possible from the other pupils. She was applying for entry to the English-speaking and highly competitive international school, since she lacked the Finnish skills needed for Finnish- or Swedish-speaking schools and she was evidently a talented student. Her spatial separation from the class indicated the overall separation from the class, but she also took the position of being a 'high-aiming', 'well-performing' student and reinforced the separation spatially.

Another pupil (Pupil#4) said that he was moving back to his family's country of origin after getting a Finnish university degree. His family had moved from Estonia to Finland for work but still had a home in their country of origin. They appreciated the Finnish education system and his sister had already returned to Estonia after completing her education in Finland. Although he had many friends at school and he emphasised the importance of them in previous educational transitions, he wanted to choose an upper secondary school that no one would follow him to. He had friends in the class, but in the study guidance and counselling episode he withdrew from the interaction. He did not express any willingness to discuss his educational choices in public. The spatial separation expressed his overall aim to return to his family's country of origin.

The withdrawal interaction was a way both pupils used to separate or even marginalise themselves from the majority. The acculturation process of Pupil#3 was leading towards separation from the local neighbourhoods and reaching abroad to a destination other than her country of origin or Finland. Simultaneously she distanced herself from the class, school and the disadvantaged neighbourhood. She also seemed to possess many strengths and resources required in international education and to study abroad (for instance excellent English competence school achievements). Instead, Pupil#4 was utilising educational choice to separate himself from the friends and peers he had been following in the past, and so preparing himself for the return to his family's country of origin.

The social space, the other pupils and the study guidance reinforced this separation by excluding these pupils from the discussion. However, they did not want to attach themselves to that discussion. Although both pupils expressed the separation themselves, it affected their positions in the school class and became an 'acculturation dilemma' (Makarova and Birman, 2015).

### 5.1.3 Integrating and adjusting

Although the study counsellor supported the inter-ethnic interaction in the class by encouraging pupils to discuss their abilities, aspirations and options openly, some events showed the bounding agency (Evans, 2002; 2007) of the study counsellor. In Finland, the core question about choice in the upper secondary education is whether the pupils choose to go into the general education or vocational training streams. Studies have shown that migrant-origin pupils are

more often than average guided towards vocational training (Kurki, 2019) and that migrant pupils with lower school grades apply for entry to the general (academic) education stream more often (Kilpi-Jakonen, 2011). On the one hand, the pupils have their aspirations in academic occupations, and on the other, the study counsellors fear that students will not be successful if they take on academic studies. One of the pupils faced this dilemma and constantly negotiated her options with the counsellor:

The migrant-origin pupils work with the form together. One of them is more interested in her nails and the battery of her mobile phone. The girl in the middle [Pupil#5] said she was not satisfied with the support provided by the study counsellor. Her five options on the form were general upper secondary schools. The study counsellor [in the class] quickly tells the girl to make an appointment with her. The girl gets annoyed and mumbles with her friends – ‘the counsellors do not want me to apply for the general upper secondary school’. The grades seem to be between 6 and 7[~7 required for general upper secondary]. The other girls respond and give support. She arranges to meet with the counsellor later. The third girl is applying for the same schools. She also makes an appointment with the counsellor. (field notes)

This tense interaction between the counsellor and Pupil#5 is understood from both positions. The pupil had her aspirations in academic education, and she wanted to make choices according to those. The counsellor knew that she might not be accepted into general education and even if she was, studying there would be difficult. She is also obligated to guide the students left without a study place to additional teaching or other education, and she wished to ensure a study place for the pupil while all options were still open. In the interviews, Pupil#5 explained that in the end, she applied primarily for general upper secondary education, but also for the vocational education stream. She was still restless about the educational choices and did not remember what streams she had applied for.

Pupil#5 reconstructed her educational aims as an academic, capable student, but in a complex relationship with the study counsellor. The self-chosen educational identity of Pupil#5 was distinctly in conflict with the teacher’s positioning (see Yoon, 2012) and in the interaction with the other pupils she positioned the study counsellor as questioning the self-chosen educational identity. The study counsellor was evaluating the skills and talent of Pupil#5 and Pupil#5 felt that she was being discriminated against because of her ethnic background. This tensioned interaction between the pupils and the study guidance they receive is a highly debated issue in Finland (Kurki, 2019; Kalalahti et al., in print). It seems that the migrant pupils are often guided towards vocational training, and girls especially to the health and care sector, since they do not receive enough support for their aspirations for general upper secondary education. Although this misrecognition of talent and competence was met in personal guidance, the tension and suspicion in the class remained. Pupil#5 also seemed to be even in a more complex educational position, since her horizon for action became

fragmented and she lacked the motivation for the vocational education she was most probably going to be guided towards in the joint application process.

## 5.2 *Urban ethnic spaces and educational attachment*

The second set of events were two excursions to open days at upper secondary institutions. These open days are designed to introduce the institutions and upper secondary education studies to pupils completing lower secondary (compulsory) education. I focus here on two institutions offering vocational training: a) logistics and b) business. Ten to 15 pupils attended both excursions and I led them through the excursions with the study counsellor. Both excursions were male-dominated and multi-ethnic. We began and ended the excursions from the home school. Since both institutions were in suburbs that were some distance from the subway, I analysed the excursions from the viewpoints of social-spatiality and bridging ties. The social-spatial events indicate interethnic ties, which it is argued enhance cultural accommodation and peer support (Kivijärvi, 2013).

Inter-ethnic relations are not only boundary-makers, but they also bind pupils together. The pupils interviewed typically highlighted how they had always had good friends to ease the educational transitions. These friends formed a loose group of Finnish-origin and ethnic-origins pupils who were familiar with each other in the nine years of comprehensive education. They were not a *bonding* group of friends, but more like a *bridging* group of young people sharing the same multi-ethnic neighbourhood and school. They expressed *weak ties*, which are instrumental by nature and do not require trust built into long-standing relationships (Kivijärvi, 2013). The weak ties, as bridging the youth to the same community<sup>2</sup>, are more open to enhancing the social integration of ethnic minority youth, whereas *strong bonding ties* provide emotional support, shared norms, as well as social closure (Kivijärvi, 2013). The weak ties, offering support and trust, have especially proved to be useful for the acculturation process.

The weak ties stem from the locality: most pupils were very local – they were born in Finland or had migrated there before starting school, and they had been living in the area for a long time. Pupils did not visit the centre of the city very often, and their hobbies were also based in the local neighbourhood. The second observation sequence portrays how the subway journey to the open day of a vocational upper secondary school was a social-spatial situation, which empowered the pupils.

Eleven pupils on board. Very rich migrant background, lots of Russian and Estonian language. I'm guiding them with the study counsellor. Pupils are joking about the 'Finnishness' among the group ('what a Finn group'). All of them are boys. We had already lost some of them when entering the subway station. Waited for a while and they came from a nearby shop. They were restless and managed to somehow stop the escalators. All still friendly and in good mood. Went on. Some of them ate noodles in the subway, missed

<sup>2</sup> Generally all ties can be seen as bonding (see Leonard and Onyx, 2003), but here the weak ties are treated as bridging, since they take place in interaction between casual school friends.

lunch. Lots of energy drinks. [...] At the school we are guided through the department of logistics service education. The atmosphere is very relaxed, and the students followed the introduction closely. The tutor is a female student with an ethnic-minority background, showing videos about pupils training and having fun with forklift trucks. The teacher is also female [in a male-dominant education field]. The boys are excited about the education, the atmosphere is open and supportive. Lots of jokes and fun. They warm up to discuss their choices with the counsellor. (field notes)

As the citation exemplifies, the pupils seemed to be nervous about the forthcoming visit. They were overactive, made more noise than usually and sought the attention of other passengers, especially when entering the subway station. We talked with them calmly and turned the discussion to the school that we were visiting. When we left the subway and walked one kilometre to the school, the mood of the interaction had changed and they were very supportive and friendly, connecting with jokes and laughs.

The socio-spatial situation of the event of the school visit represents a *weak tie*, a loose network built on school peers, young people sharing the same school and neighbourhoods and going to an open day together. The vocational school welcomed them in a familiar and non-discriminative manner, showing how there were pupils from all genders and ethnic minorities. They were able to build their locality and ethnicity into their educational identities, especially if their aspirations were on vocational training. Through the interaction and supported by the bridging ties they 'became' working-class young people who aimed decisively for vocational education and training. The weak bridging ties proved to be a powerful resource when the pupils were leaving the safe working-class multi-ethnic neighbourhood and felt familiar with the vocational institution.

An example of stronger, bonding ties was found in the class and in the interviews between a few pupils who were applying for business college. They came from different ethnic backgrounds, but in their narratives, they built strong trust on their abilities and aspirations towards entrepreneurship connecting their hobbies (sport) and families' expectations (tertiary education).

Nevertheless, the groups' excursion to the business college did not empower them like the first event with the logistics training. The field of business is much more competitive, and the welcoming information was more exclusive for the pupils. There was also a female tutor describing the education, but she stressed many skills that were a mismatch with some of the pupils I observed. She was multicultural, but in a transnational way (had travelled to many countries, attended English language courses and had studied abroad), and she was a top-performing student in the school. The institution's teacher explained about the reputation and success in the school's skills competitions. Much emphasis was laid on multiculturalism and language skills, but the emphasised languages (English, German and French) and other appreciated transnational competencies were not the ones possessed by most of the African, Asian and Eastern European students in my group.

For some, the visit to the business college confirmed the ethnic 'othering' and it was layered with other social 'otherings' (Holland and Leander, 2004). The

pupils followed the event closely and quietly and were silent about their educational aspirations. I was not sure whether they were worried about their success in the application, or if they were hesitant in their overall choices, but it seemed that the horizon for action constructed with bonding ties and individual personal aspirations had become fragmented. In this event, the bonding met the structural boundaries set by the institutions' profile and competition.

## 6. Discussion

In this article, I have addressed the question 'how do young people construct their educational identities in class-room level interactions in a multi-ethnic class' with multi-sited observation data and interviews. The guidance counselling events open opportunities for the young people to contact other ethnicities in an adult-supported environment. The inter-ethnic interaction revealed that the teacher was able to support the pupils' positive contact situations, which enhanced equality and cooperation. In the interviews, the pupils described these events from the very beginning of their school career. The school had therefore always offered them the institutional support to meet different ethnicities, in a multi-ethnic class, reducing the prejudices between the minorities and majorities (Tropp and Pettigrew, 2005). Following the outcomes of Kivijärvi (2013) on leisure time activities, the schools had succeeded in providing ethnically-heterogeneous peer groups and a solid platform for undermining ethnic boundaries.

Nevertheless, as the events in the IT class portrayed, the inter-ethnic interaction was layered and the pupils 'othered' pupils by their individual life histories, ethnicities and families' societal position. As Tropp and Pettigrew (2005) have shown, it is not self-evident that all ethnic minorities benefit equally from the inter-ethnic interaction. Among the young, the multi-ethnic interaction was open to constant identity negotiations as the pupils took equal positions in another event and hierarchical positions in another. Since there was no ethnic or social-class dominant faction in the class, the hierarchies were flexible but also unpredictable, difficult for the teacher to see and respond to.

As in de Haan and Leander's (2011) social-spatial analysis, it was evident that the inter-ethnic interaction was positioning and status marking between the (ethnic) majority and minority. However, it was also foremost about ethnic othering among ethnicities, others 'domesticating' the social space in another event and rendering the power in another event for 'common good' and bridging ties (see also de Haan and Leander, 2011: 335; Kivijärvi, 2013). The pupils expressed and recognised societal power relations and reproduced ethnicities and social classes. These stem from prejudices concerning the low employment rates of some immigrant groups (commonly families with refugee background and/or origins in African countries, see Eronen et al., 2014) or socially less valuable linguistic knowledge (commonly non-European languages, see Paakkinen, 2014).

Hence, some episodes of positioning did not reduce the prejudice but portrayed how some positions become laminated over time (see Holland and Leander, 2004; de Haan and Leander, 2011) instead. The pupils had feelings and bodily reactions which left memories not only on them but for the whole class. When repeated in time, these episodes laminate, 'thicken', the layers of positions.



It is difficult and incomplete to categorise the pupils into binary categories, since identity is always unstable and adjustable (Yoon, 2012), but it is also blind to treat ethnicities as equals and separate from other societal hierarchies. Inter-ethnic peer-relations can both unravel and reconstruct hierarchies.

Beside the hierarchies, the inter-ethnic peer-relations set boundaries to *educational identities*. In the observed events, young people actively constructed their identities (Stokes and Wyn, 2007), sometimes with the support of the bridging ties of school community and sometimes separating themselves from the class. Pupil#3 and Pupil#4 separating spatially from other pupils portrayed how the educational identity work can actively distance the pupils from the class. They faced an 'acculturation dilemma' (Makarova and Birman, 2016: 11) which excluded them from the 'common group identity' (Kunst et al., 2015). Pupil#3 who had strong educational ambitions was marginalised in the class, but she tried to achieve integration in another school and an upward societal position. Pupil#4 with a work-related migrant background had instead integrated well and utilised the ethnic ties but was nevertheless separating and returning to his family's country of origin. In both cases, the pupils expressed their forthcoming separation from the school and neighbourhoods through the interaction, and the pupils were marginalised in the class.

As the outcomes of the 'acculturation dilemma' showed, successful acculturation at school does not follow from bare adjustment to the mainstream culture or ethnic group. As Yoon has argued (2012: 994), successful acculturation requires 'adaptability and flexibility in knowing how and when to use cultures for their best social and learning needs.' Differences were evident in how the pupils were able to use their multicultural competence. For instance, for pupil#5, the discrimination she experienced limited her agency in the class, and in the excursion to the business college the expected multicultural competence was a mismatch with the competence of my study group. These events did not offer any positive interaction or positioning, but they fragmented the educational horizons of action of the pupils (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Instead, the interaction during the excursion to the logistics service education not only confirmed the horizon of actions of the pupils, but also unravelled ethnic hierarchies and prejudices concerning gender. This male-dominant institution was actively dismantling gendered stereotypes concerning educational fields (see e.g. Kurki, 2019) and emphasising their multi-culturality.

The observed events also showed how most pupils have bridging ties with the school community, which ease and empower their educational transitions, as well as affect their educational identities. Although the intertwining of the ethnic and educational identity is sometimes a complex and nuanced representation, belonging to a local (multi-ethnic) peer group served as a clue in educational transitions. Bridging ties were built on life histories in the local neighbourhoods and since the school was in an urban multi-ethnic working-class neighbourhood, it offered building blocks especially for choosing the vocational track at a nearby institution, which also welcomed different ethnicities and all genders. In this respect, these outcomes replicate those in studies showing that heterogeneous peer groups easily produce bridging ties (Kivijärvi, 2013). Adding to



this knowledge, the pupils used these bridging ties to empower and strengthen their educational transitions.

Nevertheless, not all are included in these ties and not all neighbourhoods offer such multi-ethnic spaces in which pupils would benefit from the bridging ties (see Kivijärvi, 2014). Only social-spatial spaces with high levels of the minority population and multiple ethnic minorities entail enough variation to challenge the dominant faction. As neighbourhoods like this are often located in working-class areas, the class-based positioning intertwines with ethnicities in the socio-spatial boundary-making. Some of the pupils recognised and enforced the working-class position, but others were actively othering themselves from it and taking a position of transnational or inner-city youth.

This highlights how important it is for the school to understand how multidimensional and laminated the ethnic boundaries and bridges are. Immigrant background comes with multiple otherings, and among young people there are boundaries that are not related to migrant background at all. Concerning the educational identities studied in this article, the issues of educational aspirations, language, support for learning difficulties and prejudice set up boundaries which make the negotiation between the pupils, parents and study counsellors highly complex. To foster the psychological adjustment, the acculturation gaps and lack of culturally relevant practices need to be addressed in schools and school cultures (Makarova and Birman, 2016).

To sum up, this study has strengthened the outcomes of research by Scholle and Overbeek (2010), that multi-ethnic schools do not automatically produce bridging ties and bringing ethnic minorities together in one school class does not automatically enhance positive inter-ethnic countering. Teachers need wider knowledge and understanding of multicultural competences to cherish cultural diversity and enhance equality and justice in education. As Vedder et al. (2006) summarise, multicultural teacher education should be developed in three areas: knowledge, attitudes and skills. Schools should not emphasise the adjustment to mainstreams (Makarova and Birman, 2015), but should enhance multicultural skills so that all cultures and ethnicities are met as equals.

Yet in Finland, although the urge to develop positive intergroup relations in schools has been acknowledged, the prejudice-reduction interventions have not been able to promote harmonious intergroup relations (Liebkind et al., 2014; 2018). Further, policies including multicultural education do not seem to contribute to social justice in education and teacher education automatically (Hummelstedt-Djedou, Zilliacus and Holm, 2018). Foremost there is a need to rethink the concepts and comprehensions of multiculturalism and inequalities in education (Hummelstedt-Djedou, Zilliacus and Holm 2018). According to Mikander, Zilliacus and Holm (2018: 51) the 'Nordic policymakers, schools and teachers who desire to include intercultural education in policies and practices are required to draw on a number of different fields of research, not only those called intercultural or multicultural.' The power relations and subjectivities expressed in the events and interviews of this research emphasise how the intercultural relations are not only inter-ethnic, but are also constructed by gender and class (see also Mikander, Zilliacus and Holm, 2018).

Approaching inter-ethnic interaction with an ethnographic-oriented methodology has proven to be fruitful in this research. It enabled us to see the shifting power relations, identity processing and bridging ties that were not there to be seen based on the interviews. Ethnographic methodology with observations helps us to comprehend the intersectionality taught in teacher education, but also the policymakers need to look at intercultural competencies critically to see the power dynamics that they conceal. Interaction takes place in social-spatial events which ‘intervene in the creation of identities and “cultures”’ (Dervin et al., 2012: 5).

Since the migrant background adds one dimension to the decision-making process of young people (see Varjo et al., 2020; Walther et al., 2015), the interaction in guidance events and classes becomes even more important. From the social-spatial viewpoint of this article, educational studies and policies could borrow methods from youth studies and enhance the importance of peers and group identities which supported pupils’ educational and ethnic identities (see Kivijärvi, 2014). These *local identities* (Ahonen, 2001) could be constructed in schools with interactions with other actors within the neighbourhoods, e.g. youth work, libraries, entrepreneurs and religious communities. This could strengthen the overall recognition of different cultures and ethnicities. The Finnish National Core Curricula offer many tools to bring the common and long history of minorities and immigrants in local neighbourhoods into the learning processes. These tools could assist the overall awareness of the immigrant positioning and make the images of immigration more equal and positive (see Yoon, 2012). As Kunst et al. (2015: 1449) have put together, ‘the common group identity positively predicts majority members’ efforts to integrate immigrants.’ As the ethnographic approach brings about ‘the struggles around positionality’ (Hall, 2005: 444) in local socio-spatial contexts, it creates opportunities to enhance a new comprehension of ethnicities.

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